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ABSTRACT

This article introduces Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns (MWW-LP), a variation of the popular Making Words word study and spelling instructional activity. Research indicates that proficient readers use knowledge of letter patterns such as onsets, rimes, and affixes to decode unknown words. The MWW-LP activity uses such letter patterns as building blocks for examining and making words. Steps involved in planning a MWW-LP lesson include: (1) select a multisyllabic foundation word and identify its letter patterns and individual letters, writing those letters and patterns on the MWW-LP form; (2) choose additional letters and patterns; (3) plan a series of words to be made from the letters and patterns; (4) devise semantic, syntactic, and structural clues to aid students in identifying the words; (5) identify transfer words which students could decode and spell using the letter patterns; and (6) plan extension activities using the letters, patterns, and word sets. The fast-paced and supportive structure of MWW-LP keeps the activity lively and enjoyable while giving students practice and insight in learning about new words in their reading. (Contains 10 references and 4 figures. Additional sample lessons and a blank MWW-LP form are attached.) (EF)

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Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns.

by Timothy Rasinski

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CS 217 201

Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns

Timothy Rasinski

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Abstract

This article introduces Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns (MWW-LP), a variation of the popular Making Words word study and spelling instructional activity. Research indicates that proficient readers use knowledge of letter patterns to decode unknown words. The MWW-LP activity uses letter patterns as a key building block for examining and making words. In MWW-LP students are guided by their teacher in writing and sorting words using a limited set of letters and letter patterns.

Contents

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Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns

Timothy Rasinski

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One of the more innovative and popular approaches to word-recognition instruction is Making Words, an activity developed by Pat and Jim Cunningham (1992; Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998). In the activity, which is as much word play as it is word study, the teacher leads students through a process of building words using a limited set of letters. Initially, students use given letters to make short words that are pronounced by the teacher; then they work through longer words and finally identify and make a "secret" word using all the letters from the set. Not only do students find the activity engaging, but regular use of it helps them understand how words are made -- how letters are used to represent sounds in individual words. By limiting the number of letters used in a Making Words session, teachers help students avoid being overwhelmed by the large number of letters (upper and lower case) and sounds that may be present in words.

Making Words is a central activity in the Word Study block of Cunningham, Hall, and Defee's (1998) Four Blocks elementary reading curriculum. As a curricular framework for a balanced approach to reading instruction, the Four Blocks program appears to have enormous potential for improving and accelerating students' progress in reading. Certainly, any success students experience in the Four Blocks curriculum must be due, at least in part, to the use of the Word Study block and the Making Words activity.

It is worth noting that Making Words was one of only a few instructional activities mentioned in *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), a volume commissioned by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences to report on "the effectiveness of interventions for young children who are at risk of having problems learning to read" (p. 1). Indeed, in their review of phonics approaches, Stahl, Duffy-Hester, and Stahl (1998) claim that Making Words seems "to be effective as part of [an] overall approach to teaching reading" (p. 347). Several characteristics of effective phonics instruction noted by Stahl (1992) and Stahl, Duffy-Hester, and Stahl are found in the Making Words instructional activity. Moreover, the enormous popularity of Making Words among teachers, evident from the several published reports on the topic, attests to the value of having students learn about making words in the sort of supportive environment that the activity embodies.

In an earlier article in this journal (Rasinski, 1999), I described an adaptation of Making Words that I call Making and Writing Words (MWW). Rather than manipulate a set of letter squares or cards to make words, students in the MWW variation use a blank form on which they write the teacher-specified letter set and the words they create from those letters by following the teacher's instructions or clues. The act of writing provides students extra practice that helps them develop a lasting memory for the spelling and configuration of the words. And since every student makes and writes words on his or her own MWW form, every student is engaged in the word-making activity. Moreover, since the only special material necessary is a set of blank forms for students (and possibly an overhead transparency of the form for the teacher), the activity is very easy to implement. I should note, however, that the writing requirement of MWW makes it inappropriate for young children who have yet to develop facility and accuracy in their writing abilities.

Focus on Onsets, Rimes, and Other Patterns

Recent scholarly inquiry into how children learn to decode words suggests that knowledge of certain sound and letter patterns in words may help readers figure out unfamiliar words. This is often called the analogy approach to word recognition, and a considerable amount of research supports its use as an instrument for word-recognition instruction. Stahl, Duffy-Hester, and Stahl (1998) provide a brief review of this research, and several scholars have recommended the use of specific letter patterns as an effective approach to phonics or word-recognition instruction (e.g., Adams, 1990; Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O'Hara, & Donnelly, 1996; Gunning, 1995; Stahl, 1992).

Predominant among such letter patterns are onsets and rimes, although other useful patterns, such as affixes, also exist. An onset is formed by the individual consonant or consonant combination (such as *pl, ph, st, sch, str, or th*) that precedes the first vowel in a word or syllable. Rimes are another name for letter combinations that we have for years called "phonograms" or "word families," the part of a syllable that contains the vowel and all subsequent consonants. For example, in the word *bat,* the *b* is the onset and the *at* is the rime; in *slick,* the *sl* is the onset and the *ick* is the rime. Fry (1998) has pointed out that just 38 common rime patterns can be used by readers to decode 654 one-syllable words. Moreover, these same rimes can also be helpful for partial decoding of a much larger number of longer, more difficult, multisyllabic words.

Besides onsets and rimes, other common letter patterns exist in English as well. These include prefixes, suffixes, Latin and Greek derivations, and inflected endings. Although many suffixes and inflected endings are in the form of rimes, prefixes cannot be thought of in terms of onsets or rimes since they generally contain both an initial consonant or consonant combination followed by a vowel. Latin and Greek derivations are also more complex than simple rimes or onsets. Nevertheless, these patterns are especially helpful because they can help a reader in pronouncing a word *and* in determining its meaning.

Combining Letter Patterns with Making and Writing Words

Making Words and its variation Making and Writing Words are powerful activities in and of themselves. In them, students use individual letters to think about and make words that conform to their teachers' pronunciation and other semantic, syntactic, and structural cues. However, this type of activity can be made even more potent, especially for older students, if instead of using individual letters as the building blocks for words, students use rimes and other patterns of written language. Such an activity would help students develop a greater sensitivity to these patterns, which, in turn, would help them decode and spell unfamiliar words -- whether these be simple words not previously encountered in printed form or multisyllabic words found by older students in their advanced reading. I have developed, then, an activity I call Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns (MWW-LP) that uses the Making and Writing Words format to explore words and letter patterns with students. The remainder of this article presents this activity and shows how it might work in the classroom.

Implementing MWW-LP in the Classroom

As in Making and Writing Words (Rasinski, 1999), a form is used to simplify the process of doing the activity. Clicking here will open a copy of the form in a new window. (As with the comparable form for the Making and Writing Words activity, you are welcome to download and print this form for use in your own classroom.) As preparation, the teacher first needs to identify the individual letters and patterns to be used in the lesson. I have found that one of the best and easiest ways to plan the activity is to begin with a multisyllabic "foundation" word that contains several letters (usually those that form the onsets) and patterns. These are then listed in the appropriate boxes on the form. From here the teacher adds other letters and patterns, and then plans a set of one-, two-, and three- (or more) syllable words to be used in the lesson.

Once the patterns and the words to be formed are planned and organized, each student is given a blank copy of the MWW-LP form and writes the letters and patterns to be used in the appropriate boxes. Then the fun begins! The teacher leads the students in a process of making a set of words using only the letters and letter patterns listed on the form. The teacher can either say the word and ask students to write it by drawing on their knowledge of the pronunciation, or she may give a semantic, syntactic, or structural clue that challenges students to figure out the word. In either case, students should be reminded that all words contain only the letters and patterns provided on the form.

Here are the specific steps involved in planning for an MWW-LP lesson:

1. Select a multisyllabic foundation word and identify its letter patterns (usually rimes, prefixes, and suffixes) and individual letters (usually those in onsets or individual vowels that represent the schwa). Write the letters and patterns in the appropriate boxes on your planning copy of the MWW-LP form.

2. Choose a few other letters and letter patterns that, in combination with those from the foundation word, will allow additional words to be made.
3. Plan a series of words that can be made from the letters and patterns. Begin with short, easy words and gradually move to words that are longer and more difficult to decode. Focus on those patterns that you would like students to learn. Also, try to include words that may appear in other reading or content area selections.
4. Devise semantic, syntactic, and structural clues that can be used by students to identify some or all of the words.
5. Identify "transfer words" that students could be expected to spell and decode using their knowledge of letter patterns beyond those listed on the form.
6. Plan extension activities (e.g., word sorts) using the letters, patterns, and word sets.

A Sample Lesson

My planning began with the foundation word "continental," from which I extracted the individual letters *c, t,* and *t,* and the letter patterns *on, in, en,* and *al.* Then, as I thought about words I could make from these patterns, I decided to add the individual letter *s* and the letter patterns *ar* and *ury.* Next I brainstormed one-, two-, three-, and four-syllable words that could be made from these patterns and devised semantic and other clues for some of the words I had brainstormed. Finally, I planned a set of six transfer words to use in the second part of the lesson. In MWW-LP, as in Making Words and in Making and Writing Words, the transfer words contain some but not all the letters and patterns used in the first part of the lesson. Thus, when the teacher pronounces the transfer words and asks students to write them, they need to go beyond the limited set of letters and patterns used in the first part of the lesson to the full range of letters and patterns used in writing.

My MWW-LP lesson was now planned and ready to go. A copy of it is shown below.

Foundation Word: *continental*
Individual Letters: *c, t, t, s*
Letter Patterns: *al, ar, en, in, on, ury*

Words	Semantic and Other Clues
1. tar	a black substance used to pave and repair streets
2. star	
3. start	the opposite of finish
4. art	
5. ten	the answer to 2 x 9 - 8
6. tent	a shelter made from canvas or nylon, used when camping
7. carton	a storage container
8. altar	a table used in a place of worship
9. talon	the claw of a bird of prey
10. content	
11. cent	one-hundredth of a dollar
12. century	100 years
13. talent	
14. continent	a large land mass; the earth has five of them
15. continental	

Before beginning the lesson, I remind students that the individual letters can be combined with one another to form blends and digraphs, and can be added to given letter patterns to make more complex patterns (e.g., *en + t = ent*; *ar + t = art*).

For the first part of the actual lesson based on "continental" I distributed the blank MWW-LP forms and asked students to write the letter patterns I had identified in the appropriate boxes. Their forms now looked like this:

Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns

Individual Letters	Letter Patterns
c, t, t, s	al, ar, en, in, on, ury

1	6	11
2	7	12
3	8	13
4	9	14
5	10	15

Transfer

T-1	T-2	T-3
T-4	T-5	T-6

Then, I led students through the lesson, pronouncing some of the words, giving semantic clues for others, and providing other hints (such as the number of letters in particular words) when necessary. This portion of the

activity ended with the students writing the foundation word *continental* in box 15.

The second part of a MWW-LP lesson involves students transferring their knowledge to new words. In my lesson, after students completed writing and discussing the initial set of 15 words, I asked the class to use their full knowledge of letter patterns to make and write new words. These transfer words contained some of the letters and patterns used in the initial activity, but also other letters and patterns. In my planning stage, I had decided on six transfer words and had developed sematic and other clues to help students identify them; I had also noted references to some words from the first part of the lesson that students could use for help:

Transfer Words	Semantic and Other Clues
T-1. cartoon	a humorous drawing, often found in color in Sunday newspapers; see box 7 for help
T-2. consent	to give permission; see box 10 for help
T-3. centurion	a Roman military officer; see box 12 for help
T-4. stall	to delay; a booth or compartment in a stable
T-5. partner	a companion
T-6. tension	stretched tight, what you feel when you are uptight; see box 5 for help

Once students identified the transfer words, they wrote them in the appropriate boxes at the bottom of the form. Notice how these words contain some of the letters and patterns from the initial part of the lesson, but students needed to draw other parts of these words from their existing knowledge of letters, letter patterns, and sounds that extends beyond those listed on the form.

One student's completed MWW-LP form for this lesson now looked like this:

Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns

Individual Letters	Letter Patterns
c, t, t, s	al, ar, en, in, on, ury

1 tar	6 tent	11 cent
2 star	7 carton	12 century
3 start	8 altar	13 talent
4 art	9 talon	14 continent
5 ten	10 content	15 continental

Transfer

T-1 cartoon	T-2 consent	T-3 centurion
T-4 stall	T-5 partner	T-6 tension

(Click here for other MWW-LP lessons that include foundation words; letters, letter patterns, and words they form; and other clues to help students determine the selected words.)

The final part of MWW-LP has the students cutting apart the 21 words they have written on their forms to make word cards. At various points over the next several days, students can use the cards to practice the words with a partner, play matching games, or engage in word-sort activities. (When not in use, the students can each store their cards in an envelope.) For example, students can sort their cards into piles according to categories provided by the teacher, such as the following:

- Word families (students sort words into piles by word family -- for example, the *en, in,* or *ar* word families)
- Number of syllables
- Multiple meanings (students sort words according to those that have a single definition and those that have more than one meaning)
- Words within words (students sort words according to those that contain one or more other words within

them and those that don't)
- Parts of speech (nouns, verbs, etc.)
- Positive and negative (students group words that have positive, negative, and neutral connotations for them)

Besides the word sorts, word games, and other activities, the 21 words from the MWW-LP lesson can be placed on a word wall in order to give students added exposure to them. Students can be encouraged to use the words, especially those that are less familiar, when speaking as well as in their writing. This will further enhance students' knowledge of the structure and the meaning of the words.

As students become familiar with the MWW-LP routine they can develop their own lessons and implement them with classmates. Planning and implementing their own lessons requires students to achieve an indepth understanding of how words work.

An Effective Instructional Tool

Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns extends the Making Words and Making and Writing Words activities. Like them, it contains many elements of exemplary phonics instruction. Making Words and Making and Writing Words focus on individual letters and are particularly useful with young students; MWW-LP, however, can be helpful for older students (say, 7 years and above) who need to learn to decode considerably longer words in their reading. Students at this age deal with quite sophisticated words, and MWW-LP focuses their attention on the patterns that are manifested in such words, thereby providing additional strategies for decoding. Together, Making Words, Making and Writing Words, and Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns could form one component of a reading curriculum in which word study and word play are balanced with meaningful reading and writing for authentic purposes.

Along with Making Words and Making and Writing Words, MWW-LP has become a staple of my own clinical tutoring routines for teaching reading. I have found that students and instructors enjoy the activity. Its fast-paced, varied, but structured and supported nature, as well as the fact that all students work with every item, keeps the activity lively and enjoyable while at the same time giving students practice and insight in learning about new words in their reading.

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Additional Sample Lessons

Example 1

Foundation Word: *magnificent*
Individual Letters: *a, c, i, m, n, s, t, y* (letters may be combined to form consonant blends and digraphs -- e.g., *sm, st*)
Letter Patterns: *ag, ent, if(f), im, ine*

Words	Semantic and Other Clues
1. tag	
2. sag	
3. cent	one penny
4. tent	a cloth shelter used when camping
5. tents	
6. mine	something that belongs to me
7. nine	
8. miff	to upset or offend
9. stiff	
10. sniff	to smell something
11. agent	
12. imagine	to dream or make pictures in your head
13. magnify	to enlarge
14. magazine	a type of reading material that comes to your home weekly or monthly
15. magnificent	
Transfer Words	
T-1. jiffy	a short time; see boxes 8 and 9 for help
T-2. sniffles	to sniff repeatedly, a small cold; see box 10 for help
T-3. agency	the office of an agent; see box 11 for help
T-4. centennial	a hundredth anniversary
T-5. imagination	the ability to imagine; see box 12 for help
T-6. magnification	the process of magnifying or enlarging; see box 13 for help

Example 2

Foundation Word: *helicopter*
Individual Letters: *c, h, i, r, s, t* (letters may be combined to form consonant blends an digraphs; they may also be added to patterns to create other patterns -- e.g., *alt*)
Letter Pattners: *al (all), el (ell), er, op (opp)*

Words	Semantic and Other Clues
1. hop	how rabbits move
2. stop	another word for *halt*, you find it on red street signs
3. chop	
4. shell	a turtle lives inside one
5. teller	the person who waits on you at a bank
6. shelter	
7. hope	
8. scope	an instrument you look into, as in *micro...*
9. salt	
10. shop	
11. topic	
12. topical	
13. tropical	referring to a region of the earth that normally is hot and humid
14. shopper	guide students to understand that the word is spelled with a double *p* and not as *shoper*
15. helicopter	
Transfer Words	
T-1. telescope	an instrument for viewing distant objects; see box 8 for help
T-2. landscape	a view of natural scenery; see box 8 for help
T-3. opals	gems with delicate colors
T-4. shallow	not deep; see box 4 for help
T-5. hopeless	without hope; see box 7 for help
T-6. pepper	a spice that often accompanies the word in box 9

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Transfer

T-1	T-2	T-3
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